

~~ARTICLE APPEARED~~A7NEW YORK TIMES
28 September 1985

U.S. Relaxes Scientific Data Policy

By PHILIP M. BOFFEY

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Sept. 27 — The White House announced today that the Government would not try to restrain the publication of unclassified scientific research.

The announcement eased concern among scientists that the Government, in its efforts to keep sensitive technical information out of Soviet hands, would limit open communication of even the most basic research that might one day have military application. Scientists have feared that the Government was moving in the direction of de facto classification of officially unclassified research.

White House officials made it clear that they were not backing away from efforts to prevent the disclosure of technical data of clear military value to the Soviet Union but were simply defining more clearly where and how to draw the line on the kinds of material to be restricted.

The announcement said that the President approved a new "national policy" that calls for the results of fundamental research, the kind that is typically performed at universities for the sake of advancing scientific knowledge, to remain unrestricted "to the maximum extent possible."

Open Exchange Sought

If some fundamental research has to be tightly controlled to protect the nation's security, the new policy says, then it will have to be formally classified. The established method of protecting military secrets. It cannot be restricted simply by ordering scientists not to communicate the results in meetings, publications, or conversations with foreign scientists, according to the policy.

"Our goal is to foster the free and open exchange of unclassified research so necessary to a free society and an expanding economy," the White House announcement said.

The announcement puts the Government's stamp of approval on a policy to exempt unclassified fundamental research from any national security restrictions that would prevent open publication or discussion of results and methods.

The President's action was applauded by leaders of the scientific and academic communities.

"I'm heartened because I've seen the gates close on basic research as the military has moved to restrict the flow of technologies to the Soviet Union," said Dale R. Corson, president emeritus of Cornell University, who headed a 1982 study of scientific communication and national security for the National Academy of Sciences. "I don't believe the new directive is going to solve all the problems, but a signal has been given by the President and I think it's the proper signal."

The new policy applies strictly to Federally financed fundamental research that is performed at colleges, universities and laboratories and is ordinarily published and disseminated widely. The policy does not apply to industrial research and development that is geared to the design and production of products and is ordinarily restricted for proprietary or national security reasons.

The President's action is expected to ease some but not all of the tensions that have developed between the Government and the scientific community in recent years as military and intelligence officials have tried to stem the flow of sensitive technologies, such as microelectronics and lasers and computers, to the Soviet Union.

Friction and Confusion

When officials of the Defense Department and Central Intelligence Agency began a campaign in the early 1980's to stem the loss of sensitive technologies, they did not at first distinguish sharply between fundamental research and the kind of technical data, such as blueprints and manufacturing processes, that were more directly related to making weapons.

Friction and confusion developed as Government security officials blocked the publication of some unclassified research papers at scientific meetings, or required that they be presented at sessions from which foreigners were excluded, or asked universities to bar foreign scientists from access to certain sensitive but unclassified research material.

The new policy appears to rule out efforts to restrict access to fundamental research programs on the campus, a major point of concern. But it does not appear to end friction over Government insistence that some unclassified technical data, such as that involving microelectronics, only be presented in scientific sessions from which many foreign scientists are barred.

On Sept. 17, the leaders of 12 of the nation's largest scientific and engineering societies accused the Pentagon of, in effect, creating a new kind of classification for such material. They said they would no longer sponsor restricted sessions at their meetings.

The new policy would not generally apply to their complaint, White House officials said, because the sessions in dispute generally involve research that is not considered fundamental as defined in the new White House policy.

"I haven't seen either the directive or the regulations," said Frank Press, president of the National Academy of Sciences. "But from what I'm told it looks like an excellent clarification. It's all very positive and very constructive."

"It's useful to have the statement out," said Robert M. Rosenthal, president of the Association of American Universities, who had some reservations.

"I don't think it changes at all the underlying tension," he said. "Those elements in the Government who believe they can enhance security by keeping things from the Russians are still there and still very effective. But the new directive will provide those of us who believe in openness with a tool for arguing."

The policy statement will be followed by a proposed new section of the export administration regulations, which are used to restrict exports of "technical data" that might benefit an adversary nation.

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